



North Carolina High School Reform

Fiscal Brief

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Summary of High School Reform Efforts in North Carolina

Executive Summary

Performance data, judicial pressure, and national interest have all fueled a wave of high school reform projects in North Carolina. Recent initiatives across the State have taken three primary forms:

- 1) **Learn & Earn**, which provides opportunities for high school students to earn college credits free of charge while still enrolled in high school;
- 2) **Redesigned High Schools**, which adopt a curricular focus that provides accelerated learning opportunities while connecting classroom education to workplace skills; and
- 3) **Turnaround High Schools**, which work with the Department of Public Instruction to raise student performance in compliance with Judge Howard Manning's ruling in *Leandro v. State of North Carolina*.

The purpose of this brief is to provide the NC General Assembly clear information regarding these high school reform efforts. In addition to describing each reform effort, the brief discusses the management and funding of high school reform in North Carolina. It also summarizes existing evaluations of these initiatives.

Finally, this brief presents a number of questions that the General Assembly should consider as high school reform expands and matures:

- 1) Is high school reform effective?
- 2) Is high school reform an efficient use of State resources?
- 3) Are any reform efforts duplicative?
- 4) Should reform efforts be centralized under one agency?

Introduction

High school reform is not new; efforts to modernize high schools have been going on for decades. Recently, however, multiple factors have converged, prompting a new wave of high school reform in North Carolina.

Multiple indicators have documented the need to improve student performance in high schools. The NC Department of Public Instruction (DPI) recently released the state's first four-year cohort graduation rate, which revealed that 68% of freshmen who entered high school in 2002 graduated four years later; only 55% of low-income students graduated on time.¹ In 2006, 75 high schools (19%) were designated either Priority or Low Performing Schools, because they had less than 60 percent of their students' 2005-06 test scores at the proficient level.² Furthermore, the NC Community College System has reported that 49% of recent high school graduates require at least one developmental course.³

Judge Howard Manning, a Wake County Superior Court judge presiding over *Leandro v. State of North Carolina*, has applied legal pressure on public schools to reform. In 2005, he drew statewide attention when he accused failing high schools of "academic genocide."⁴ The following year he issued a directive that, if test results did not improve, 17 high schools would have to be restructured and given new principals or face closure.⁵

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has brought national attention to high school reform. The Foundation champions increasing graduation and college readiness rates through smaller, innovative high schools and providing access to college courses early. Between 2001 and 2007, the Gates Foundation invested more than \$1.7 billion to improve high schools, supporting over 1,800 schools in 47 states.⁶ In